



Policy Forum 04-21A: Kim Jong Il's April 2004 Visit To China



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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 04-21A: Kim Jong Il's April 2004 Visit To China", NAPSNet Policy Forum, May 07, 2004, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy-forum-online-kim-jong-ils-april-2004-visit-to-china/>

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PFO 04-21: May 7, 2004

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by Byung Chul Koh

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I. Introduction

In this essay, Byung Chul Koh, director of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam

University, asserts that Kim Jong Il's recent visit to China is a significant event with meaningful implications beyond just North Korea-China relations. Rather, it potentially impacts the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula, as well as all of Northeast Asia. However, the single most important outcome of Kim's visit was North Korea's reaffirmation of their commitment to the continuation of six-party talks. What is not known, however, is whether the North has agreed or intends to display "patience and flexibility" in a true sense.

II. Essay by Byung Chul Koh

"Kim Jong Il's April 2004 Visit To China"

by Byung Chul Koh, Institute for Far Eastern Studies

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's "unofficial" visit to China from April 19 to 21 was a significant event that has implications not only for Pyongyang-Beijing relations but also for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast region as a whole. Based on what both China and North Korea have revealed thus far, then, can one make any "educated guesses" about what the visit's impact is likely to be in the near future?

Kim's visit marked the third time he went to China since becoming North Korea's paramount leader. The two previous visits occurred in May-June, 2000 and January 2001, respectively. It is worth noting that the first foreign trip Kim made after being named his late father's successor-designate in the early 1980s had been to China. In June 1983 he made an 11-day visit to China, receiving red carpet treatment; Hu Yaobang, the then head of the Communist Party of China (CPC), took the extraordinary step of accompanying Kim on a tour of Chengdu and Nanjing.(1)

The highlights of Kim's latest China visit, as summarized by Liu Hongcai, deputy head of the CPC International Liaison Department, were the following:(2) His summary, it should be stressed, is consistent with one published by Pyongyang's official news agency, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), a day later.(3)

First, Kim had a chance to exchange views with Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders on "China-DPRK friendly cooperative relations in a cordial, friendly and frank atmosphere." "Leaders of the two sides," according to Liu, "expressed their willingness to treasure the China-DPRK friendship meticulously cultivated by the elder generations of leaders of the two countries and to continue exerting efforts to enhance and develop the friendship."

Second, by exchanging information on "domestic conditions of each country" and holding "in-depth discussions on many issues, including economic construction, rural development, city administration, party building as well as international and regional situations," the two sides "deepened understanding, trust and friendship between the two countries."

Third, the two sides agreed on a series of measures designed to "breathe new force and vitality into the traditional China-DPRK friendship," notably, "improving high-level exchanges, deepening all-round cooperation, strengthening coordination in international affairs and intensifying economic and trade relations."

Fourth, the two sides affirmed their joint commitment to the "six-party talks process." According to Liu, "Kim spoke highly of China's new collective leadership's positive stance on and important contribution to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula." Liu added that "Kim expressed clearly his adherence to the final goal of nuclear weapons-free peninsula and his stance on seeking peaceful solution to the nuclear issue through dialogue" and stated that the "DPRK would

continue to actively participate in the process of six-party talks with patience and flexibility."

It is noteworthy that the Chinese side took pains to refer to a "nuclear-weapons free Korean Peninsula," inferentially leaving open Pyongyang's option of pursuing what it calls "peaceful," that is, energy-oriented, nuclear program. Hu Jintao also stressed that the DPRK's "reasonable concerns should be taken into account and settled with due attention." (4) This is a reference to the North's demand for a security guarantee from the U.S.

The North's commitment to six-party talks, especially, to "actively participate" in the process "with patience and flexibility" is by no means new. In fact, the North had made the same commitment on the eve of the second session of the six-party talks in February but that did not translate into any concessions or tangible results. What is new, nonetheless, is that Kim Jong Il himself has made the commitment to be patient and flexible. The price the Chinese leadership has agreed to pay for this includes unspecified economic aid, something China has been providing the North repeatedly. China, for example, is believed to have delivered "about \$50 million in aid to North Korea--including heavy fuel oil and the promise of a glass factory--as an inducement to attend the talks in February." (5) It is notable that members of Kim's entourage during this visit made a point of inspecting a glass factory in China. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan confirmed that China had "decided to provide aid gratis to the DPRK" during Kim's latest visit, noting that "the amount involved in the aid is still limited and [that] further discussions will be held on the details of the aid." (6)

The single most important outcome of the Kim visit, nonetheless, is the reaffirmation of the commitment by the top leaders of the two countries that six-party talks will continue. What is not known, however, is whether the North has agreed or intends to display "patience and flexibility" in a true sense. Most important, will the North ever accept the CVID formula--that is, a complete, irreversible, and verifiable dismantlement of its nuclear programs? Or will the North continue to insist that it does not have a uranium-based nuclear-weapons program and that it will hang on to its program to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes? What of the North's own "freeze for compensation" formula?

In an interview with Japanese journalists in Pyongyang on April 23, Jong Tae Yang, director of the division in charge of negotiations with the U.S. in the DPRK Foreign Ministry's American affairs bureau, stuck to the North's previous position on all these issues--denial of the existence of an HEU (highly-enriched uranium) program, intention to continue a "peaceful nuclear program," and rejection of the CVID formula. He equated CVID with a transparent scheme by the U.S. to collect intelligence in the North in preparation for an all-out attack. He also repeated Pyongyang's demand for a comprehensive solution of the nuclear issue based on the principle of simultaneous actions, reciting the three-stage proposal the North made in the first two rounds of six-party talks, including removal of the DPRK from Washington's list of terrorism-sponsoring states, lifting all sanctions, and supplying heavy fuel oil. On a positive note, Jong expressed his belief that a third round of six-party talks would be held before the end of June as stipulated in the chairman's summary statement issued at the end of the last round. (7)

In the absence of some flexibility by the Bush administration, then, the North is unlikely to make significant concessions in the next round of six-party talks. The "patience and flexibility" Kim Jong Il has promised to Hu Jintao may well be confined to the North's continued participation in the multilateral process. The results of the general election in South Korea, which has produced a majority in the National Assembly that extols more autonomy in Seoul's foreign policy and more conciliatory policy toward the North, may be a factor in the equation. So, too, will be the November presidential election in the U.S., which may affect the North in two ways. First, the North may be tempted to play a waiting game in the hope that a victory by Senator John Kerry will put an end to

Washington's "hostile" policy toward Pyongyang. Second, the North cannot be oblivious to the constraints of the deteriorating situation in Iraq on Washington's options, which provides an additional incentive to wait. Additionally, the time the North gains can be used to produce more nuclear material and even weapons, which, the North may calculate, will enhance its negotiating leverage and deterrent power alike.

As Nicholas D. Kristof wrote in his recent New York Times column, "Mr. Bush has his hands full with Iraq and doesn't want attention paid to the North Korean nuclear threat that is substantially worsening on his watch. Mr. Kim figures that he may as well as wait to see whether John Kerry is elected, and he'd also like to finish reprocessing the plutonium and enriching the uranium." Kristof argues that the "only possible route out of this crisis is a grand bargain. Mr. Bush, who listened way too much to Mr. Cheney on the topic of Iraq, should reflect on something Mr. Cheney said on his China trip about negotiations over North Korea's nuclear programs: 'Time is not necessarily on our side.'"(8)

Whether Kim Jong Il's latest China visit will help resolve the nuclear standoff, then, may well hinge not only on how the North will behave at the next round of six-nation talks in Beijing in the coming months but also on whether the Bush administration is prepared to display some flexibility of its own before it is too late. The only thing that is reasonably certain is that six-nation talks will continue for the time being.

(1) B. C. Koh, "China and the Korean Peninsula," Korea and World Affairs, vol. IX, no. 2 (Summer 1985), p. 266.

(2) "CPC Official on Kim Jong Il's China Visit," China View, April 21, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2004-04/21/content_1433038.htm

(3) "Kim Jong Il Pays Unofficial Visit to China," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Pyongyang, April 22, 2004, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2004/200404/news04/23.htm>

(4) "Kim Jong Il Pays Unofficial Visit to China," KCNA, Pyongyang, April 22, 2004; "Hu Jintao, Kim Jong Il Hold Talks," China View, April 21, 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2004-04/21/content_1432811_1.htm

(5) Edward Cody and Anthony Faiola, "N. Korea's Kim Reportedly in China for Talks," Washington Post, April 20, 2004, p. A13.

(6) PRC Foreign Ministry, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Press Conference on 22 April 2004 , <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/2510/2511/t91968.htm>

(7) "Kita Chosen: kaku no heiwa riyowa keizoku, tai-Bei kosho kachoga meigen," [North Korea: Peaceful Use of Nuclear Power Will Continue, Division Director in Charge of Negotiations with the U.S. Make Clear}, Mainichi shinbun (Tokyo), April 24, 2004, <http://www.mainichi-msn.co.jp/today/news/20040424k0000m030091000c.html>

(8) Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Real Nuclear Danger," New York Times, April 21, 2004, p. A23.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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